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PAUL AND TWO WOMEN—II

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

BY ANNE C. E. ALLINSON

It was a May evening and Rome was drenched in silvery light from a moon, brilliant and serene, riding in a windless, cloudless sky. In a modest house near the Porta Capena a few men and women had gathered, according to their custom on one night in the week, to exchange confidences about their new faith. No one of them held this faith composedly as an inheritance or a part of family tradition; rather, each had won it as an individual possession, in an emotional crisis of life. To some, perhaps, it had come full flowered, while in the hearts of others it had dropped like a seed to fructify in the daily ways of living; but to all, certainly, it was a new thing, a break from the old order of thought, a wonder still and a high romance. Their meetings were not formal or crystallized. These people came together just because they could not help sharing with each other a secret which to them seemed full of power, of sweetness, of joy. Their frankness was not the easy babbling of sentimentalists but the welling of clear streams of feeling across the barriers of ordinary reserve.

The house in which they met to-night belonged to Rufus, a repairer of musical instruments, and was redolent of refinement and an exquisite orderliness, as if harmony were the principle of his daily life, whether among the lyres and flutes in his workshop on the Via Sacra or here at home under the shadow of the great gateway. It was oddly placed in a noisy, restless neighborhood, where travelers leaving or coming into the city by the Appian Way were likely to halt on all sorts of errands. Directly opposite was a station where horses and carriages for a journey could be obtained and exchanged. Shops catering to every need crowded in and fastened like leeches upon the passing tour-

ists. Eating houses and wine rooms of all grades sought the patronage of Senator or slave. All day long and into the night the street was vocal with hawking cries and boisterous with the clattering feet of horses and men. But the house of Rufus preserved within itself a quiet apartness.

The dining-room where he and his friends were eating supper together, simple as it was, gave evidence of taste. On the walls were painted two pictures, good of their kind although they indicated no great artist's hand. One of them was a landscape, with a green meadow and a brook, and a flock of sheep guarded by a shepherd, young and strong and debonair. The other showed a young Orpheus playing his lyre under an olive tree and drawing the birds and beasts of the wood to him by the lure of his music. "Both are like Jesus Christ," he used to say to new-comers, with a smile. To-night, however, only familiar friends had gathered about the supper table. The cloth and napkins were white and fine. Terra-cotta lamps, excellent in design, although inexpensive, threw a soft glow on the table, and over the baskets of fine wheat bread and the graceful earthenware mixing bowl and wine-cups.

After supper, Rufus read letters recently received from Christians in Antioch and Ephesus and Corinth. They were written in Greek, but had been translated before the meeting by Matho, a Greek government slave who was a copyist in the Palatine Library and had recently been brought to the "new way" by Lucius. These men and women and other groups like them in Rome, unimportant as they were in the life of the metropolis, were connected by long lines of communication with different parts of the Empire. Outside of the imperial and government circles, probably no other kind of Romans had so keen a sense of connections elsewhere. Back and forth over the long Roman roads and across the conquered seas passed news of the Kingdom of God. Although Christians lived the simplest daily lives, such as alone were open to their class and estate, they had an extraordinary reach of imagination. An idea connected this modest house near the Porta Capena with cities in Greece and Syria, and along the whole coast of Asia Minor. Those who believed in the idea were emissaries of a Kingdom to which all the nations

of the earth must some day be gathered. In addition to living rightly themselves they conceived it to be their duty to pass on to all mankind the principle that had transfigured them. This vast hope lifted them over the ordinary frontiers of thought. Not even Rome herself could girdle their vision, which swept the whole empire, and even pierced, as keenly as that of the philosophers, beyond the "flaming ramparts of the world". An imagination so alert made it easy for them to establish a personal intimacy with unknown men and women at a distance. Such new relationships were more enlarging even than the common interests of their labor guilds. Nearer than their Roman neighbors, nearer even than some of their own households, seemed those far-off Greeks and Syrians who shared their citizenship in a new city of the mind, who united with them as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, in the family of God. One of the charms of the evenings at Rufus's house was that this little band of hard-working people could lose their daily routine in a sense of wide affiliations without arousing ridicule or suspicion. To outsiders the very mention of such ideas seemed either the wordy extravagance of fools, or a sort of veiled treasonableness, as if in some way Rome and the Emperor were thereby made secondary.

Sometimes the meetings were interrupted by a loud knock at the door, with an errand from a neighbor or an inquiry from a stranger which laid claim to the courtesy or goodwill of the master of the house. But to-night no shadow from the world outside fell athwart the peace within. This was apparent when, after the reading of the foreign letters, conversation, friendly and warm during the supper, grew more earnest, and then, with a fine simplicity, changed to prayer. It was always the prayers of these people which were the most self-revealing, because, unlike the ritualistic formulas of their inherited religion, they had become a spontaneous mode of inward renewal, means, not of placating a God, but of "civilizing the whole inner man". On some nights the burdens of life would become apparent, needing to be lifted by common supplication to the God of comfort. The strain of toil, the bitterness of sorrow, the poison of anxiety, would be revealed in passionate pleas for strength and succor. But tonight it seemed as if only joy impelled the friendly com-

munion. One after another, each prayer became an expression of love and praise and thankfulness. Rufus himself closed the hour. His gift for prayer was singular and preëminent, because he found it more natural to talk to God than to other men. When the spirit fell upon him he seemed to become oblivious of any human being near him. Prayer to him was the normal expression of a faith so burning that it consumed any ordinary shyness or unwillingness to reveal the innermost thoughts. More than once some stranger, touched lightly by the new faith and only persuaded by a friend to come to a meeting, had been swept onward by a prayer of Rufus to a compelling knowledge of the God to whom he prayed and the Christ before whom he laid bare the secrets of his conviction. To-night the desire of his prayer was that "the way" might be made clear to all who traveled in darkness. He prayed as even his friends had rarely heard him, until it seemed as if the walls of the room must disappear, and the infinite break through the expectant sky upon their straining vision.

Nobody tried to come after him. After a silence the company quietly broke up into smaller groups or pairs, and gradually drifted into the larger atrium where they could have music and sing together. Anna, the mother of Rufus, stayed behind to give some gentle order to the maid who came to clear the room. Lucius lingered to talk with her as he often did. After the servant had disposed of the table and the supper couches, they drew chairs toward each other and fell into conversation, while from the atrium floated in the soft refrain of a favorite psalm of Paul's, translated and set to the lyre by Rufus. Lucius always wanted to talk with Anna, because of all the Christians whom he knew, men or women, she seemed to him to have most completely made her own the star which was in the gift of Jesus Christ. His own delicate and sensitive nature felt in her something more delicate and more sensitive than himself, and at the same time something so high, so starry, that his friendship for her was mingled with a profound reverence. This quality, indeed, was felt by everybody who came in contact with her. She was no longer young. Her hair was gray, parted in the middle and curving across a low sensitive brow, but her skin

was smooth and tender, like a child's, with a little flush in her cheeks like a pale pink rose. Her body was slender and small and graceful, like the stem of a birch tree in a soft winter landscape. Her ways were so courteous that everybody felt especially singled out by her for kindness and consideration. She never made any difference between people, because her manners clung to her as a quality of her own, not to be changed by the attitude of those who came near her. People invariably, therefore, gave her their best, restraining their tempers, hiding their littlenesses, trying unconsciously to measure up to her own largeness, of which she in turn was beautifully unconscious. Indeed, in the last analysis, Lucius had come to believe, it was the complete omission of self in her that made her the most potent personality among all their friends. He wondered about it a good deal. She never talked about unselfishness, never seemed conscious of doing her duty by other people, was only perplexed and even a little distressed if people told her that she helped them. When Narcissus had said once that he thought that you should assure yourself every night before you went to bed that you had helped somebody, she had seemed startled. "But how can I?" she said to Lucius afterwards. "How can we ever be sure that we help each other?" And yet among all the men and women who believed in this new religion of Love, nobody seemed to love as completely as Anna did. It must have been a native endowment, Lucius concluded, born with her in her cradle as physical beauty is born, and then cultivated and increased a hundredfold by the power of Jesus Christ within her. Her self simply was not there to form an obstruction, as so often it did in others, to the outpouring of a larger life. Through her, this life flowed out toward all around her. Old men and young men sought her friendship and counsel, women came to her with their troubles, children turned to her as flowers turn to the sun. Nor was she above the common facts of life. For the children she always had sweetmeats, for men and women a direct and penetrating common sense. It was evident to Lucius that deep within her were great areas of reserve. She talked less than any of them at their common meetings, and never prayed in their hearing. And yet of them all she supremely conveyed the im-

pression of a life fed at inexhaustible sources. Excellent as was her intelligence, it was spiritual insight that set her apart and made her, in all her social obscurity, seem to those who knew her a really distinguished personage. Without analyzing it they perceived in her the result of habitual commerce with spiritual forces which were sought after by themselves with heavier travail. None who loved Paul wondered that he turned to Anna on terms of peculiar personal intimacy.

To-night Lucius wanted especially to ask her about the imprisoned leader whom he had not been able to visit for some time. There was a boom in the building trades and he had been working almost more hours than there were in a day. A little shadow fell over Anna's face. "I saw him only this afternoon," she said, "and I found him very tired and very sad. Who do you suppose had been to see him? Honoria, the sister of the lovely young Felicia—I think you were here one evening when she came. It was very fine of her to let her maid bring her, and we all thought her exquisitely courteous—do you remember? I have seen something of her, and also at her house I have met the sister. I had heard that Honoria was very learned and clever, but she met me the first time in a simple, natural way, and I felt at once for her a strong liking. Since then we have had several talks—I have found it unusually easy to talk with her because she is so honest. I knew that she had been very happy over her sister, but I never dreamed that she would herself go to see Paul. She had just left him when I arrived. He seemed more depleted than I have found him after arguments and discussions with the Jews. In surprise I said to him, 'But if she came at all, she must have been willing to receive. She was not defiant, was she?' 'No, no!' he said wearily enough, 'but she held out the wrong cup to be filled. She brought me her intellect, and to that Jesus crucified is but a stumblingblock and foolishness.'"

Lucius leaned forward, eager to listen, and as the tender music swelled a little more loudly through the open door, seeming, as it were, to isolate and protect them in their comprehension of each other, Anna told him, as she had told no one else, not even her son, of the hour of agony through which she had sat with Paul. To Lucius she could entrust her sorrow for the torture of a

great soul. And from the story his sensitive spirit garnered a new understanding, which bore fruit thereafter in the lives of other men and women. Such was their creative transmutation of Paul's hour of hopelessness. Fevered and uncontrolled as Anna had rarely seen him, walking up and down the room without his usual regard for the soldier who must walk with him, their leader had poured out to her in burning words how Honoria, searching for his ideas, had entirely missed the central passion of his life, the beginning and the end of all his thinking. He had not made Jesus Christ real to her. His own passion had evidently sobbed itself out to Anna as if he had betrayed his Master, as if he had crucified Him afresh, in failing to stamp His image forever on one more human heart.

But that had not been all. If the immensity of his regret seemed far to transcend the importance of Honoria, it was because Honoria's state of mind had widened out for him into sweeping memories of his own past. Once he, too, had relied upon the intellect, immured himself within the understanding, measured the ways of God by the learning of men. And what had been the result? He had persecuted and denied Jesus Christ in the persons of His followers. He had breathed out fire and slaughter against those whom he should most have loved. He had been "exceeding mad" against those whose feet he should have washed in humility and reverence.

Sin—sin—the sin of his blindness—not even Christ could forever wash away the memories of it. Only when he was suffering for Christ, stoned or beaten with rods, hungering or thirsting, subjected to perils of land or sea, knowing weariness or painfulness—only then could he feel at peace. And here in Rome, well treated although in prison, fed and clothed and victim of no sudden peril by day or night, there were hours when the madness of remorse had its way with him. Honoria, for all her responsive courtesy, had created for him such an hour. At its close—so he told Anna—all he could see was the face of Stephen, looking like an angel when they stoned him, and himself holding their garments that they might the quicker kill him. Yes, Anna said to Lucius, it had been a cruel time for Paul; and she dreaded the night ahead for him—sleepless, prob-

ably, tortured by hatred of himself, agonized by thoughts of the world's blindness, exhausted by the futility of his yearning to bring light among the shadows.

She ceased speaking and they sat in silence for a long time. The music in the atrium had given place to a murmur of contented voices. The soft air from the summer night came in from an open window on the quieter side of the house. The moonlight strayed in, too, and fell across a little bird in the picture of Orpheus playing the magic music. A thoughtful slave, who had been allowed to share the singing in the atrium, slipped in to replenish the lamps. Anna's face had grown serene again. She clasped her hands quickly in a young, happy gesture that her friends loved, and turned to Lucius with a smile. "Ah, dear friend," she said, "he is a great man, and he is our leader and guide and teacher. But he, too, needs just to become a child again. That would be the way of Jesus Christ."

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